News While It WAS News

Broadcast Journalism In Radio's Early Years

by Donna L. Halper

When I mention that I am doing research on the history of radio news, most people assume I am researching the '30s and '40s. A common misconception is that radio in the 1920s was a music and sporting events medium only. Few textbooks even mention radio news until the mid-1930s, so I can understand why people might think broadcast journalism began around the time of World War II. But news via the "radiophone" actually goes back to broadcasting's earliest days, and how much news certain stations were able to offer may surprise you.

Station 8MK Test Broadcasts

It was perfectly understandable that the test broadcasts at the newly built Detroit News station 8MK (later known as WWJ) on Monday night August 30, 1920 featured phonograph records by such classical greats as Enrico Caruso and Amelita Galli-Curci. Many of the early station owners believed radio should be used only for "good music" and educational material; they saw it as their duty to improve the tastes of the mass audience, and to that end, their stations would program a steady diet of opera singers and classical concerts (eventually, adding an occasional sporting event and, of course, sermons on Sunday). Playing some of the finest vocalists even during the week of testing let 8MK's listeners know right away that this would be a high-class station. And the response was immediate: those who received the test broadcasts contacted the newspaper, expressing amazement at the music coming from their radio receivers. But 8MK was about to broadcast something entirely different and unique—election coverage. On page 1 of the *Detroit News* for August 30, 1920, the headline announced "The News Radiophone To Give Vote Results." The article went on to say that all county, state, and congressional winners would be announced the moment the information was received. So, even though KDKA's coverage of presidential election returns in early November is much better known, more than three months earlier, 8MK had aired the news of who won and who lost in the Michigan elections; and it was not the only time the station would report on local events. Today, we take such coverage for granted, but in 1920, radio was doing what had never been possible before — bringing the audience the story as the event unfolded. The *Detroit News*, the first newspaper to own a radio station, did not see radio as competition; rather, publisher William Scripps saw it as a medium that could enhance what his newspaper had to offer. This showed remarkable foresight: most newspapers of the early '20s were threatened by radio, and many seldom mentioned it until they absolutely had to. Perhaps the editors hoped that if they ignored it, radio would go away. In fact, as radio increased in its popularity, some editors actively tried to prevent radio from broadcasting the news. Thus, Mr. Scripps' immediate acceptance of radio was quite unusual.

We may never truly know which station did news first; while the battle for recognition between KDKA and 8MK/WWJ is well known, there were also other stations, operated by amateurs, doing some of the things we associate with the commercial stations — these ham stations often broadcast news and music for their friends, and kept on doing so until early February 1922, when the Department of Commerce finally forbade them from doing so. There is considerable evidence, for example, that inventor and engineer Lee DeForest, who operated amateur station 2XG in High Bridge, NY, broadcast news reports in 1916: while DeForest had a clear preference for opera and classical music, he also knew how to get publicity, and broadcasting an important news event was definitely one way to make people notice his station. So in November, he arranged to broadcast election returns (he received them from the newsroom at the *New York American*). Not only was the broadcast a success — it may have been heard by as many as 7,000 amateurs — but it also attracted favorable attention for his company, the De Forest Radio, Telephone & Telegraph Co. in New York City. (Unfortunately, DeForest ended his broadcast before Woodrow Wilson came from behind to win, so the people who did receive his broadcast heard the wrong candidate declared the winner...)

A rare photo of WEEI's meteorologist, E.B. Rideout, who was perhaps the first staff weather forecaster in New England, joining WEEI in the mid-1920s.

Amateurs And Morse Code

The amateurs, with their knowledge of Morse code and their ability to understand the complexities of broadcast equipment, became essential in early radio. Most early broadcasts were mainly heard by amateurs, who also built many of the early stations. One of the areas where the amateurs really made their presence felt was in disseminating information. The beginnings of commercial radio (1920–22) occurred in an era long before computers, when much of the United States did not even have long distance telephone service, and some rural sections still lacked

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An exceedingly rare photo (courtesy of his daughter Geraldine Harrison Lattimore), of Gerry Harrison, Boston's first pro wrestling announcer, at the station where he first started doing the matches, WLEX in Lexington, MA.

electricity; the "wireless" emerged as an excellent way to keep people up to date. For example, the *New York Times* reported on December 16, 1920 that the government was now making its daily market reports, with the latest quotations on fruits, vegetables, livestock, and grain, available to the amateurs; it was these ham radio operators who then distributed the information to newspapers, shipping agencies, and companies interested in agriculture. Some hams who had their own station also arranged to send the information out via the airwaves. A well-respected ham in Denver, William "Doc" Reynolds, operated that city's first (and for a time, only) station throughout 1921, using his amateur calls 9ZAF. While he was best known for broadcasting music, which he sometimes did from a moving vehicle equipped with loudspeakers, he also offered sports scores and local information, which, according to the *Rocky Mountain News*, the community came to depend on. (Station 9ZAF became KLZ Radio in early 1922.) When the hams were no longer permitted to broadcast, the commercial stations took over, receiving the sports scores by telegraph and then broadcasting them to an eager public. When the hams were no longer permitted to broadcast, commercial stations received the market information direct from the appropriate government agencies, and it was announced each weekday; this was especially welcome in rural areas, where farmers were grateful for much faster access to news they needed. While we today may not think of market reports (or even weather reports, which also proved very popular in the rural areas that worried about storms or tornadoes) as news, to the listeners in the early '20s — and keep in mind, there was no official way to do a newscast yet — this information was quite newsworthy, and radio made it easy to obtain.

Recognizing Radio's Reach

In late 1921, at least one station began doing reports on the economy; in mid-December, the well-known economist Roger Babson, spoke on station 1XE (later WGI) Medford Hillside MA, and thousands heard his talk. He decided to return in subsequent weeks to give his forecast of economic conditions, and his comments were quoted by the print media (which refused to mention that the talk had come from radio — they might mention the city where the talk was given, but they would not include the station's call letters). If you recall the article I wrote about 1XE, the AMRAD station, in the June 1999 issue of *Popular Communications*, you know about some of the innovations of this pioneer station, the first to broadcast in Massachusetts. In addition to helping launch a successful career for Mr. Babson, who later spoke on much bigger stations, 1XE was among the first stations to work with law enforcement in catching criminals. The Boston Police quickly figured out that the new medium of radio reached a very wide audience, and in May of 1921, it was decided to broadcast nightly reports of stolen cars. Eunice Randall, the station's assistant chief announcer (and one of the few women engineers), was one of the first to read these reports, which described the car, gave the license number, and provided a number that listeners could call if they saw the vehicle. And according to the newspapers, some of the cars were actually recovered because listeners did call in tips. The modern TV show "America's Most Wanted" probably has no idea that the basic concept was being used on 1XE, as well as on stations in several other major cities, in 1921. (And few people recall that the New York City Police even operated their own station in 1922, to keep the public informed about police activities— its call letters were WLAW). Detroit too had a police station for a short time, and it used the call letters KOP.)

There were several reasons why early broadcasters did not immediately attempt to do regular news. For one thing, some very real technical limitations existed in the early '20s, making such reporting difficult: going outside the studio to do a remote broadcast at the scene of an event could be very complicated, especially if renting phone lines was involved. The company which owned those long distance lines, AT&T, did not usually rent them out because AT&T had its own station, New York's WEAF; for a time in 1922–23, only that station and the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company's station in Washington DC, WCAP, got to use the high quality phone lines for remote broadcasts. There were other lines, meant for telegraphy, that many stations ended up using, giving them poor quality and plenty of resentment towards AT&T's monopoly. (On some occasions, AT&T did in fact make exceptions, if you could meet the price they quoted to rent their lines. Most small stations could not.)

How It Was Done

If there was no access to long distance phone lines, the only way for the majority of stations to cover a story was to get there and actually transmit from the scene. But only a very few stations had their own high-quality mobile equipment which they could pack up and take to a news event: for example, in early 1922, WJZ in Newark made use of the news truck from the *Newark Sunday Call*, and 1XE/WGI used a delivery truck which was outfitted with sending and receiving equipment. In the mid-'20s, there were also a handful of roving stations called "portables," which operated in a variety of locations, such as at state fairs, amusement parks, and conventions. But again, these were the exceptions. For most radio stations, they had a fixed studio location, and getting to a breaking news story in a timely fashion was not easy. Also, audiotape had not yet been invented, so a radio reporter couldn't even come back to the station with any

Here's a rare photo of a portable station. Some early stations had a portable rig, usually installed in a truck, so that they could broadcast from an event. This photo shows the portable of WTAT, the Edison station in Boston, along with announcers and an engineer, circa 1924. Photo courtesy of David Horn.

interviews to play on the air. Given these complexities, it is no wonder that most stations, even those run by newspapers, tended to concentrate on playing music. It was much simpler to find people who wanted to perform. Print journalism had the upper hand at this point: nobody expected the newspapers to have the story immediately, and nobody expected to hear the newsmaker's voice while newspapers could offer lots of photographs and in-depth descriptions, radio could only offer immediacy when the event was still going on and a reporter was able to get there. That is why when radio stations broadcast news in those early years, they usually invited reporters from a newspaper to come to the studio and expand upon what they had already written in their columns.

But there were times when a news story happened near enough to the station (such as at a local hotel or convention center) that radio was able to carry it – in 1921–22, political figures speaking on radio for the first time were definitely making news. Women had just gotten the vote in 1920, and in early 1921, KDKA in Pittsburgh was able to broadcast the banquet of the Pittsburgh Press Club from the William Penn Hotel; one of the speakers was newly elected Oklahoma Representative Alice M. Robertson. There is evidence that KDKA also carried a talk by President Harding in early 1921, and a Baltimore station, WEAR, is said to have carried a speech by him in June 1922. (We certainly know that President Harding thought radio was important; he had his own receiving set installed at the White House in February 1922 so that he could listen in like the rest of the country's radio fans.) As radio became increasingly essential in people's lives, a number of mayors, senators, and dignitaries realized they could increase their own name recognition by broadcasting. They went to the studios of their local station, and began giving talks. While this may not sound like our expectation of news (or even sound very interesting), the audience seemed to respond favorably, just because it was an opportunity to hear what these people sounded like. Soon, those politicians who were inarticulate or couldn't give an intelligent speech were at a disadvantage. Many candidates became very fond of radio, and it was soon a part of many local campaigns. The reason was obvious: where in the past, it hadn't been possible to visit every part of their district, with one good radio speech, a candidate could be heard for hundreds of miles, while getting a reputation for being up to date and in touch with the latest technology. One of the first members of congress to put radio to good use was Republican Senator Harry New of Indiana, who appealed to his constituents by radio in late March of 1922; his talk, which he gave from his senate office in Washington D.C., was heard in numerous places throughout Indiana and even made the national newspapers. The next night, Rep. Alice Robertson, already known as a dynamic speaker, decided to try a broadcast from her office. Unfortunately, one problem in early radio was constant and unexpected technical difficulties, such as static, fading, and interference; Miss Robertson had the bad luck of trying to broadcast on a night when reception was terrible. Undaunted, she used a telephone and delivered her speech as a long distance call, to the amusement of the *New York Times* which, like many newspapers, was perfectly happy to report on any problems radio was having.

Overcoming The Obstacle

Despite the previously mentioned obstacles, it appears that many early stations found a way to have regular newscasts — which, as we shall see, that caused a whole new set of problems. While "Famous First Facts" credits WBAY in New York with being the pioneer in broadcasting a daily newscast (largely, it seems, on the strength of a press release published in the *New York Times* saying such an event would occur beginning the first of September 1922), there were already other stations experimenting with daily news. It should come as no surprise that 1XE/WGI was one of them. While much of the WBAY (later WEAF) broadcast was to be set aside for radio news — that is, news about the latest technological advances and questions from listeners about building a better radio, WGI made arrangements with the *Boston Traveler* newspaper in mid-March 1922 to do daily news bulletins and an in-depth 3 p.m. newscast which concentrated entirely on news of the day. According to the *Traveler*, "These [news] broadcasts at present consist of items of foreign, national, and local interest, chief features of the stock market, expert comment on market affairs, an item for women only, [and] pithy... editorial comments on current events." (*Boston Traveler*, May 5, 1922, p. 11) Sometimes, Guy Entwistle, the *Traveler's* radio editor, came on the air to comment about regulations and laws affecting broadcasting, but in general, the newscast was much like what we would expect a newscast to be today, except for the fact that the *Traveler* reporters read the news from their own areas of specialization, and there was much more description of events. Like the *Detroit News*, the *Traveler* seemed to realize that if a story was breaking after the newspaper had gone to press, radio offered a fine way to up-date the audience and then encourage them to get the newspaper for further details. WGI also had an arrangement with the *Boston American*, to do an evening newscast. In describing it, the *American* explained that it wanted to offer the radio listeners news that had

occurred too late to be in the last edition of the newspaper. Here again, rather than seeing radio as a threat, the *American* (and other Hearst newspapers) embraced radio. But as I mentioned earlier, not all editors were so enthusiastic.

Tough Talk From AP

The biggest and most powerful of the wire services, Associated Press, provided news to hundreds of newspapers all over the United States. Their news could only be used by permission, and only from newspapers which were subscribers. When radio came along, several of the newspapers which operated or worked with the pioneer stations were members of the Associated Press; this included 8MK's parent, the *Detroit News*, the *Pittsburgh Post*, which worked with KDKA, and the *Boston Traveler*, in partnership with WGI. It presented an interesting dilemma. Reporters from the newspapers wanted to read the news on radio, but some of that news came from the Associated Press (AP), which had to give permission — and more and more, AP began to refuse as radio increased in popularity. AP, evidently concerned that radio would bring so much competition that it would hurt the sale of newspapers, issued a memo in mid-February 1922, forbidding its member newspapers from helping radio by providing news for them. Afraid of possible legal trouble, the Westinghouse stations temporarily stopped broadcasting any news at all. Other stations tried to find ways to get around the memo — the Hearst newspapers had a wire service called the International News Service, and there was no complaint from that company about giving radio access; but because AP was the best known and had the most contacts all over the world, their efforts to stop radio from using any of their material had to hurt. If stations needed an excuse not to broadcast news, the threat of legal action from AP might have convinced them.

On the other hand, despite the tough talk from AP, on a case by case basis, some stations did get permission to use newspaper material. In fact, in the March 31, 1922 story in the *Boston Traveler* announcing its arrangement with WGI, there was a brief remark about the newspaper receiving "special permission" to do so, for the purpose of advancing new technology in newsgathering. And although Westinghouse may have told the AP they had ceased doing news, they seemed to have resumed by the late fall of 1923; in December, Radio Digest announced a new feature was being heard on KYW (then in Chicago), "The World Crier," which, according to the station's manager, used the morning and evening newspapers plus other reports to provide a newscast every half hour. But throughout the early '20s, AP's official anti-radio posture remained in effect, and from time to time, General Manager Frederick Roy Martin or his staff would catch a member newspaper disobeying the memo; several newspapers were fined for doing so. Still, despite ongoing negative comments from AP and from certain magazines which dismissed the impact of radio, many stations of the early '20s continued to offer at least one newscast a day; it stands to reason that they still got their information from newspaper reporters, whose newspaper more often than not belonged to AP.

Late 1922

In their December 9, 1922 issue, Radio World reported that there were 582 stations on the air, and 83 of them were owned by newspapers and/or magazines. Most of these were no threat to AP, since they used their station primarily to enhance their image in the community and give their reporters some publicity. While the *Detroit News* station (by now officially known as WWJ) had some news bulletins and covered events like boxing matches or political talks, most of the station's programming was music. The newspaper tied its name in with everything on the air, of course — one group of performers was known as the Detroit News Orchestra, even though nobody in the band was a news reporter. In Springfield, MA, Westinghouse station WBZ continued to have the reporters from the *Springfield Union* and the *Springfield Republican* come in to give talks — drama critics, women's page editors, and humorists were always in demand. But on a serious note, in April of 1924, the editor of the *Republican*, Waldo L. Cook, gave a talk about how radio and newspapers should stop thinking of each other as competitors, and keep working together to give the public even more information. In Brooklyn, New York, the *Brooklyn Eagle* permitted its famous editor and columnist H.V. Kaltenborn to broadcast on the Signal Corps station, WVP, as early as April of 1922; he not only did news but also did a weekly commentary, and he was among the first print journalists to begin using radio to express opinions; he was soon on the air in New York and would remain an influential radio commentator for decades Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., a long-time print journalist from the *Washington Star* also became popular as a radio commentator — Frederic William Wile's news commentaries on WRC, which began in 1923, got such positive response from listeners that by 1926, he was profiled in several radio magazines, and he ended up broadcasting for NBC. *Boston Globe* columnist Willard DeLue, who had expertise in travel, aviation, Boston history, and numerous other topics, was a welcome guest on Boston radio throughout the mid-1920s. Based on correspondence of his that I have read, DeLue genuinely enjoyed giving educational talks, which he researched and wrote himself especially for the broadcasts. He also enjoyed telling the listeners about the world of print journalism, explaining to them what went on behind the scenes and how various departments of the *Globe* operated.

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Radio's Spontaneity — And President Coolidge's Radio Speeches

And I could not write about early radio news without mentioning a couple of stories that radio covered first, ahead of the newspapers — although sometimes that was because the station was part of the story. In March 1923, listeners to WEAN in Providence heard first hand that the Shepard Department Store was on fire; the announcer at the station (whose studios were in the building) continued to describe the scene until the fire department ordered him to evacuate with everyone else. A similar story had occurred in Atlanta in 1922, and WSB was close enough to provide the early details; this turned out to be a good thing because some off-duty firefighters heard the report and rushed to the scene to help out, getting WSB some very favorable publicity in the process; the story even appeared in the prestigious "Literary Digest" magazine. And much later, in April of 1932, radio would also get a scoop it didn't really want, when WBZ (by this time in Boston) broadcast a live event that was supposed to be a publicity stunt, but which went tragically wrong; a circus lion, which was supposed to roar on cue, got loose from its cage and rampaged through the studio, injuring a number of people while the horrified station staff announced the entire scenario.

Gradually, it became impossible for the newspapers to deny radio's influence. In early December 1923, President Calvin Coolidge gave an address to Congress, and the fact that radio was about to broadcast it, said one newspaper, meant that "[his voice] will be heard by more people than the voice of any other man in history." The speech required some hard work on the part of AT&T — in order for a number of stations to participate in the historic broadcast the phone company installed about 3,800 miles of long distance telephone lines. Interestingly, contrary to the myth that he rarely spoke (he was often called "Silent Cal" and known for choosing his words carefully), President Coolidge was a frequent user of radio, giving about one speech a month. Most of us studied in school about how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made frequent use of radio during the Depression with his popular "Fireside Chats," but the audience of the '20s became quite accustomed to hearing presidential talks thanks to Presidents Harding and Coolidge.

The '20s saw the number of news events growing, as technology improved and radio was better able to carry them. 1924 was the year when both the Republican and the Democratic presidential conventions were broadcast for the first time (along with some not so flattering commentary about who spoke well and who didn't). The Associated Press continued to resist granting radio permission to use newspaper reports, but as the 1924 presidential elections approached, another of AP's competitors, United Press, was working with New York's WEAF through member newspaper the *New York Sun* to provide full election coverage; well-respected announcer Graham McNamee read United Press and *New York Sun* reports as election results came in; in fact, United Press even encouraged its member newspapers to broadcast. Meanwhile, two major newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Boston Herald*, refused to obey AP and said they would work with radio on Election Day. Even the respected print journalism trade magazine *Editor & Publisher* was softening its opposition to radio news, and saying that it could on certain occasions serve a very useful purpose (although of course, it could never replace print). And on the radio side, *Radio World* magazine said in its July 19, 1924 issue that the broadcasts of the presidential campaign were making the audience even more interested in politics and helping Americans to be better informed.

Radio News Comes Of Age

As major news occurred, more and more stations made an effort to carry it, so many, that by May of 1925, the Associated Press had to slightly modify it original ban on radio news. The members voted to permit the use of AP news on radio if an event was "of nation-wide importance." Thus, the now famous Scopes evolution trial, which took place in Tennessee in July of 1925, was broadcast. Listeners heard the views of some outspoken and controversial speakers on world issues and current events when WBZ, whose signal carried well beyond Boston, began broadcasting the monthly "Ford Hall Forum." Sporting events, from baseball to boxing to hockey, were heard, as were daily business reports from the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as stock quotations and market reports. Also by this time, many stations offered something farmers and residents of rural areas found especially useful, expanded weather reports. If you looked at the radio listings for a typical day in late 1925, you would find that while music and specialty shows (women's hours, children's story time) dominated the programming, nearly every city had at least one station with news bulletins or a full news broadcast.

"News" was still being defined in radio's first decade: broadcasters acknowledged that radio was primarily an entertainment medium, yet many of them realized there was a need to provide the listeners with more than just dance bands and preachers. Some media historians have said that what DeForest, 8MK, 1XE and even KDKA did by broadcasting stolen car reports, election returns, and reports from financial markets was not the same as doing regular news. If we apply today's standards, I cannot disagree. But in the early 1920s, those standards did not exist. Early radio certainly did not have "news on the hour" nor even the concept of a "news department" during those formative years. Program managers were literally creating policy as they went along, and news of the president's latest speech might appear in the same newscast as information about tonight's wrestling matches. (And I would be remiss if I didn't mention that wrestling matches were also considered newsworthy back then — reports about wrestling were found on the sports page of some 1920s newspapers. A Boston announcer, Gerry Harrison, became locally famous for his play-by-play of wrestling, which he ultimately brought to New England's Yankee Network in the early 1930s.) Some stations aired announcements of lost pets, or put descriptions of missing children in the newscast. Throughout radio's formative years, an increasing number of stations found ways to provide whatever serious information the audience required, whether it meant hiring a meteorologist (several stations had their own weather expert by the mid-'20s) or bringing in newspaper reporters to elaborate on a story they had covered. As unstructured as some of it was, these first attempts at doing news via the airwaves gave listeners the opportunity to be better informed, regardless of their social class or where they lived. For making those efforts and for believing in broadcast journalism, these early pioneer stations deserve our thanks. ■

Donna Halper is a radio consultant and media historian. She is the author of "Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting," which was published by M.E. Sharpe in May 2001.